DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 029 280 AL 001 901

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Sociolinguistic Perspectives on the Speech of the "Disadvantaged".

Pub Date 19 Apr 69

Note-12p.; Paper delivered at meeting of the Speech Association of the Eastern States, New York, April 19, 1969.

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.70

Descriptors-Cultural Disadvantagement, Dialect Studies, *Linguistic Theory, *Negro Dialects, Negro Youth, Nonstandard Dialects, Socially Disadvantaged, *Sociolinguistics, *Tenl

Views from different disciplines and within different disciplines often come into sharp conflict with one another about the speech of lower socio-economic class Negroes. Furthermore, some current views of Black English have challenged basic linguistic and sociolinguistic premises about the nature of language. It is therefore the purpose of this paper to examine some very basic premises about the nature of language which have a direct bearing on current viewpoints toward Black English: (1) Languages are notoriously "nonlogical;" it is therefore a deceptive practice to teach the so-called "logic" of languages and to vindicate statements about the rules of a language by philosophical dictums about the logical nature of languages. Yet one of the common grounds for rejecting Black English by educators is that it is illogical. (2) A second premise of the linguist is that all language systems are adequate for communication. Yet, one need not read very far in the literature on the speech of the disadvantaged to find them characterized as non-verbal, verbally destitute, or at best drastically deficient in their speech. (3) A basic linguistic axiom is that language is systematic and ordered, but some treat Black English as an unsystematic and irregular deviation from standard English. (4) Language is learned in the context of the community, but Black children are judged by a norm to which they have not been exposed--SE. (Author/DO)

ED029280

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SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE SPEECH OF THE "DISADVANTAGED"

Speech Association of the Eastern States
April 19, 1969

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April, 1969

During the last several years the speech of lower socio-economic class Negroes has been of interest to a number of different disciplines, including sociology, psychology, education, speech and hearing, and linguistics. Correspondingly, we have heard varied proclamations about the language behavior of this population. If all current views were complementary, we could be comforted by the thought that we were simply viewing the same phenomenon from several different vantage points. Such is not the case, however. Views from different disciplines and within different disciplines often come into sharp conflict with one another about the speech of lower socio-economic class Negroes (which I shall refer to as Black English, a term which does not have the emotive connotations that terms such as substandard or nonstandard Negro English have). Furthermore, some current views of Black English have challenged basic linguistic and sociolinguistic premises about the nature of language. Although it might be convenient to simply ignore some of these views, their current popularity and influence necessitates a more responsible evaluation. It is therefore the purpose of this paper to examine some very basic premises about the nature of language which have a direct bearing on current viewpoints toward Black English.

One of the primitive assumptions about the nature of language is that verbal symbols are basically arbitrary, established only by convention. Although one cannot deny a certain degree of consistency in the relation of language to the extralinguistic world and within itself, lan-

guages are notoriously "nonlogical". It is therefore a deceptive practice to teach the so-called "logic" of languages and to vindicate statements about the rules of a language by philosophical dictums about the logical nature of languages. Yet one of the common grounds for rejecting Black English by educators is that it is illogical. Such writers as Bereiter and Engelmann(1966) have, in fact, attempted to demonstrate that Black English imposes certain cognitive limitations on the logical operations of the Black English speaker.

To illustrate, one of the most cited examples of the inherent logical foundation of standard English is the use of negatives with indefinites. If a person uses a sentence such as John didn't do anything, it is understood negatively, but if a person should use the sentence, John didn't do nothing it can only be meant as a positive statement since two negatives logically make a positive.[1] In this view, if a person uses the construction in a sentence such as John didn't do nothing because he was so lazy he is using English in an illogical way. Therefore the sentence does not mean what the speaker thought it meant. The speaker apparently means that John did not work, but by saying John didn't do nothing he affirms that John actually did something. Interpretations of this sort ignore a quite regular rule in Black English (as well as in such "illogical" languages as Spanish, Italian and French) which states that when you have a negative sentence with indefinites, you may add a negative element to every indefinite (e.g. We ain't never had no trouble about none of us pullin' out no knife or nothin'). Furthermore, the fanciful notion of

1. This sentence could, of course, be interpreted postively in a context such as He didn't do just nothing, he was always busy. Usually, there is a strong stress on nothing to indicate this intention.

logicality does not even apply to Standard English, where one gets sentences with two negatives which are definitely negative, as in the sentence John didn't do, I don't think. Proclamations about the inadequacy of Black English on logical bases can only be attributed to a naive disregard for one of the primitive premises about the nature of language. If it seems that I am striking out at a "straw man", one need only look at the work of Engelmann and Bereiter, who maintain (Bereiter 1965: 199) that a difference in the negative patterns of Black English (i.e. "he does not know the word not") and standard English is interpreted to mean that "he is deprived of one of the most powerful logical tools our language provides".

A second premise of the linguist is that all language systems are adequate for communication. Language is a human phenomenon which characterizes every society and is completely adequate for the members of the society to communicate with one another. The social acceptability of a particular language variety is totally unrelated to its adequacy for communication. Yet, one need not read very far in the literature on the speech of the disadvantaged to find them characterized as non-verbal, verbally destitute, or at best drastically deficient in their speech. What is such a pronouncement based on? Let us construct a rather typical social situation which serves as the basis for these pronouncements. A white researcher sets up his laboratory in an empty classroom; an intimidated child is brought in and placed in front of a microphone. From the many times the child has been "corrected" for using Black English patterns in the regular classroom or the Head Start program he knows that anything he says may be held against him, regardless of what the interviewer might say. It is indeed the smart child who says nothing — classified as verbally destitute. But switch the context just once — to the ghetto alley and the groups of black youths involved in a game of ritualistic insult such as the dozens". Any middle class white suburbanite might

certainly be classified as non-verbal in that context as they find themselves unable to match verbal quips. What we see then, is the designation of non-verbal or verbal destituation which is based on a standard English norm in a middle class context.

The question of the adequacy of Black English as a communicative system brings out a very important matter on the viewpoint with which Black English is considered. In actuality, it is much broader than the linguistic situation in the ghetto since it involves how one views this entire culture. One can view Black English, or ghetto culture for that matter, in terms of two basic models which Baratz (1969: 99-101) has called a <u>deficit</u> model or a <u>difference</u> model. A deficit model views speech differences in terms of a norm and deviation from that norm, the norm being middle class white behavior. From a sociological perspective, this means that much of ghetto behavior (such as matrifocal homes) is viewed as a pathology. In terms of the speech behavior, Black English is considered, in the words of Hurst (1965: 2) "the pathology of non-organic speech deficiencies". On the other hand, a difference model, much more common to anthropology and linguistics than sociology and psychology, considers society and language varieties as self-contained systems, inherently neither deficient nor superior.

The model of description has important implications for the description of black English both theoretically and practically. If all differences between standard English and Black English are simply considered corruptions of standard English, one may miss important structural facts about the nature of Black English. For example, consider the following interpretation of the form <u>be</u> (as in <u>He be busy</u>) by Ruth Golden, who views Black English in terms of a descending scale of deviation from standard English.

> Individuals use different levels of language for different situations. These levels vary from the illiterate to the formal and literary. For instance, starting with the illiterate, He don't be here, we might progress to the colloquial, He ain't here, to the general and informal He isn't here up to the formal and literary, He is not present (1963: 173).

From the perspective of a deficit model, be is simple considered a corrupt approximation of standard English. As has been pointed out now by a number of descriptive linguists, (see Fasold 1968; Stewart 1967; Wolfram 1968), the use of be in a sentence such as He don't be here represents a grammatical category unique to Black English. Rigorous analysis employing the techniques of modern descriptive linguistics reveals that it is used only to represent an action which occurs at intermittant intervals -- usually called "habitual" or "distributive". There is no comparable grammatical category in standard English and the concept inherent in this category must be expressed by a circumlocution of some type (e.g. by an adverb such as sometimes, every-day, or usually). Similarly, the use of been in an active sentence such as The boys been ate the candy, is not simply a deterioration of a standard English sentence. Rather, it has a meaning of 'remote' time which must be indicated by other means in standard English (e.g. adverbs such as a while back, a long time ago, etc.). Furthermore, the use of been contrasts with the grammatical category of 'completed or emphatic action' which is indicated by done in a sentence such as The boys done ate the candy. Although the examples could be expanded considerably, more important than such an enumeration is the essential principle -- Black English structures cannot simply be considered as deviations from standard English -- to take this position can only lead to an inaccurate description of a self-contained system which is perfectly adequate for communication.

In terms of sociolinguistic situations, it is quite common for a socially dominant culture to view a socially subordinate one as having an inadequate means of communication. This view is a common manifestation of linguistic ethnocentrism by the middle classes. Thus, Spanish speaking South Americans often consider the Indian peasants to have no valid language system -- verbally destitute. The current treatment of Black English is often no more sophisticated, although it may be more subtle because of what Stewart calls "the American myth of togetherness" (i.e. there are no socially subordinate and superordinate cultures in America).

Our previous point concerning the adequacy of Black English as a system of communication naturally leads us to our next premise concerning language, namely, that is systematic and ordered. Therefore, when differences between related language varieties are found, they are not haphazard and random, but regular and systematic. Again we are faced with a current viewpoint of Black English which is in conflict with a basic linguistic axiom -- that Black English is an unsystematic and irregular deviation from standard English. Consider, for example, the following statement by Hurst, who subsumes the differences between Black English and Standard English under the label "dialectolalia":

> ...dialectolalia involves such specific oral abberations as phonemic and subphonemic replacements, segmental phonemes, phonetic distortions, defective syntax, misarticulations, mispronunciations, limited or poor vocabulary, and faulty phonology. These variables exist most commonly in unsystematic, multifarious combinations (1965: 2).

The above position unambiguously treats Black English as an irregular, unsystematic and faulty system rather than a "different but equal system". Furthermore, such a position can only be taken when actual descriptive and sociolinguistic fact are ignored, for the sociolinguistic evidence points to differences between standard English and Black English which are systematic and regular. Take, for example, the case of word-final consonant clusters

in such words as test, ground, and cold. In Black English the final consonant is regularly absent -- a systematic correspondence of a single consonant in Black English where a cluster is found in standard English (so that tes, groun, and col). But these final consonants are not absent randomly or unsystematically. Thus, we note that the correspondence of a single consonant for a word - fine cluster only occurs when both members of a potential cluster are either voiced or voiceless (e.g. st, nd, sk, ld, etc.). But when one of the members is voiced and the other voiceless, as in clusters such as mp (jump), lt (colt) and nt (count) this correspondence does not occur -- instead, Black English is like standard English in that both members of the cluster are present. The view that differences between related language varieties are random and haphazard is dangerous not only because it conflicts with empiric data but also from a practical viewpoint. It can lead to an unsystematic approach in teaching standard English and the teaching of points that may be irrelevant in terms of the systematic differences between the two systems.

As a final premise, we must observe that language is learned in the context of the community. Linguists have generally agreed that in all language situations which have been observed children have a fairly complete language system by the age of five — a system which from contact with other individuals in their environment. Whether this is primarily the parent-child relationship (which some claim for the middle class white community) or from child peers (which is sometimes claimed for the black ghetto community) does not seem as important as the fact that their language in acquired through individuals in the immediate context. But once again we find a basic socio-linguistic principle violated in the evaluation of the speech of lower-socio-economic class Black Children. Is the language acquisition considered in the context of the indigenous community (and there is certainly sufficient social contact in the black community) or is it evaluated in terms of a

superordinate external norm to which the child simply has not been exposed. For example, we often hear about the "language retardation" of ghetto children from prominant scholars as Engelmann Bereiter, and Deutch. Bereiter concludes:

> By the time they (i.e. ghetto children) are five years old, disadvantaged children of almost every kind are typically one or two years retarded in language development. This is supported by virtually any index of language development one cares to look at (Bereiter 1965: 196).

A closer examination the various language indexes which result in Bereiter's conclusion reveals that they are all based on standard English norms. That these children do not speak standard English is understood to mean that they are linguistically retarded (and, in many cases, this fallacious reasoning is taken one step further, that they are cognitively deficient). Thus, if a child says <u>He nice</u>, a perfectly normal Black English sentence (like many other languages, which have zero copula realization), it is considered a underdeveloped standard English approximation.

A good illustration of this type of reasoning is found in Deutsch's (1964) test of auditory discrimination. The failure to distinguish such words as <u>Wes</u>, the man's name, from <u>west</u>, the geographical region, or <u>pin</u>, the pointed object for holding things together, from <u>pen</u>, the writing object, is considered to be indicative of underdeveloped auditory discrimination. But we observe that these homophonous pairs are the result of a systematic Black English dialect pattern in which word-final <u>st</u> clusters are only realized by <u>s</u> and the vowels <u>I</u> and <u>ɛ</u> do not contrast before nasal sounds. Homophony is a widespread and common language phenomenon, and the above homophonous words should cause us no more concern than the homophony of <u>red</u>, the color, and <u>read</u>, the past tense of <u>read</u> or <u>roll</u>, the edible object and <u>role</u> relating to social behavior. What we observe, then, is that the Black English speaker is penalized for the patterned homophony of his dialect,

whereas a middle class New Englander is not penalized for the homophony between caught, the past tense of 'catch' and cot, the object for resting, or taught, the past tense of 'teach', and torte the pastry. What we see is nothing more than the erroneous transfer of legitimate dialect differences into matters of language acquisition.

Recently Baratz (1969) has conducted a bidialectal test in which she has compared the profeciency of a group of black ghetto children in repeating standard English and black English sentences. As might be expected; the children were considerably more proficient in repeating the Black English sentences. When they repeated the standard English sentences, however, there were predictable differences in their repetitions based on interference from Black English. The same test was then administered to a group of middle class suburban children, who repeated the standard English sentences quite adequately, but had predictable differences in their repetition of the Black English sentences based on interference from standard English. Which of these groups, then, was linguistically retarded? Unfortunately, we have confused social acceptability (and no one would deny the social stigmatization of Black English) with language acquisition, ultimately a matter of middle class ethnocentrism.

In conclusion, I have emphasized the fully systematic but different nature of Black English as it is acquired in the black ghetto. It would be nice if I had simply slain a dead dragon, but unfortunately, the views with which I have taken issue, enjoy current popularity in a number of disciplines. What is more depressing, these views are often communicated to and adopted by those in a position which directly affects the lives of many ghetto children. Furthermore, these views have a direct bearing on the attitude of both white and black middle class teachers toward Black English. The attitudinal problem towards this intricate and unique language system is probably the biggest problem we face. But there is also a practical reason

for understanding some linguistic and sociolinguistic basic premises about the nature of language with reference to Black English. An understanding of systematic differences between Black English and Standard English must serve as a basis for the most effective teaching of Standard English. I am certainly not so naive to suggest that Standard English is not a prerequisite for making it in "whitey's world", and the child who desires to do so must be given that option. For the child who chooses this alternative, we must adopt an attitude and methodology which will take full advantage of what we know about the nature of language systems.

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